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ABSTRACT

The community college mission includes such diverse goals as preparing students for job entry, teaching literacy, and satisfying students' personal interests. Measuring the colleges' transfer rates by no means tacitly elevates the transfer function above these other functions; it merely helps institutions estimate the effects of interventions on student progress in that area. Many methods of estimating transfer rates have been used. Dividing the number of transfers in a given year by total two-year college enrollment produces a transfer rate of about 5%, while considering students who enter community colleges directly from high school, attend full-time, declare transfer intent, and obtain an associate degree, may result in a transfer rate approaching 85%. The transfer rate should be defined as all students entering the community college in a given year who have no prior college experience and who complete at least 12 college-credit units, divided by the number of that group who take one or more classes at a university within 4 years. Using this definition, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC) in Los Angeles, California began, in 1989, soliciting annual data from a national sample of two-year colleges. In 1992, the institutional data were supplemented by data from state agencies to determine which students had completed coursework at a four-year institution. By March 1993, the CSCC had received data on student transfer from more than one-third of public two-year colleges nationwide. The study found a consistent transfer rate of approximately 22% for each cohort of students entering a two-year college from 1984 through 1987. Data tables are included. (PAA)

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Analyzing Community College Student Transfer Rates

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, GA, April 14, 1993.

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Analyzing Community College Student Transfer Rates

Paper Presented at American Educational Research Association
Annual Meeting, Atlanta, April 14, 1993
Arthur M. Cohen, UCLA

This paper examines the rate of student transfer from community colleges to universities in the United States. The data on which it is based are drawn from the Ford Foundation-funded Transfer Assembly project, now in its fourth year. The project set out to define a valid way of calculating transfer rates that could be applied across the nation and to encourage colleges, universities, and state agencies to report data according to that definition. Its overall intent was to build a consistent way of estimating the community colleges' contribution to their students' progress toward the baccalaureate.

Caveats

Let us report at the outset that the Transfer Assembly does not examine certain effects that are already well-known.

- We know that the transfer of students from community colleges to senior institutions is only one of the community colleges' major educational missions. Others include preparing students for job entry or career upgrading, teaching literacy and general education, and satisfying the students' personal interests. Measuring the colleges' transfer rates by no means tacitly elevates the transfer function above those others; it merely provides an indicator of institutional accomplishment in that one area.

- We know that the students who begin in a university are more likely to attain the baccalaureate than the students who begin in a community college; Astin (1993) and Orfield and Paul (1992), among others, have made that point repeatedly. The process is analogous to the likelihood of one's reaching a desired destination after having boarded a nonstop flight as compared with one who has to change planes along the way.

- We know that any definition or way of calculating transfer rates is imperfect because it excludes some pertinent data and because it is time-bound. Much of the data about students' aspirations, particular curriculums that they follow, whether or not they attend full-time, and the extent to which they are involved in campus life, either are not available or are compiled so inconsistently that they cannot be used in a broad-scale study. Furthermore, some students take five years, ten years, or longer to transfer (theoretically, students are potential transfers until they either show up at a university or die) but the data set must be cut off at some finite time.

- We know that providing data on student transfer is not a top priority among college managers, who may feel that untoward comparisons will be made between their institutions and other colleges. But we know also that the potentiality for misunderstanding is greater when the legislative aides, newspaper reporters, and other

commentators generate their own data and definitions than it is when the institutions publicize their own outcomes. The college that provides no news sets itself up for bad news.

The reason we start this paper with these caveats and explanations is because in the four years of the Transfer Assembly we have presented the data at numerous meetings, only to be challenged invariably by people saying, "Are you going to tell everyone that our transfer rate is good or bad? The rate would be higher if you omitted the students who didn't intend to transfer or those who took the wrong pattern of courses. Why don't you talk about the outcomes of our occupational programs?" These types of reactions seem to arise from the deeply felt conviction that any hard data can be misunderstood. Better to not know, the college staff members often say, than to have a consistent, valid, data set from which year-to-year comparisons can be made and from which the community colleges' actual contributions can be estimated. Not to single out community college educators; there are few incentives to organize systems to produce information on institutional outcomes in any sector of higher education.

With all of those caveats, what are we trying to do? We want to encourage the colleges to provide data on student flow in a consistent manner so that they can estimate the effects of interventions that they make on behalf of this basic institutional function. We want them to organize their student information systems so that they can respond readily to questions of student progress. For the external reviewer, the data collected in this fashion provide a base of national information that can be used to reconcile the conflicting claims on the one hand, of the community college as a dead end for people seeking a baccalaureate or, on the other, of the community college as democracy's ultimate opportunity institution.

The Definition

Many ways of estimating community college to university transfer rates have been used. Looking at the extremes, dividing the number of transfers in a given year by the total college enrollment yields a transfer rate of around 5 percent, whereas dividing the number of transfers by the number of students entering the college directly from high school, attending full-time, declaring transfer intent, and receiving associate degrees may yield a rate toward 85 percent. Obviously the definition is crucial.

The definition should be valid and readily understandable, and it should be based on data that are feasibly obtainable. In general, the number of students who enter the community college, subdivided according to certain criteria, must be divided into the number who subsequently matriculate at a four-year college or university. This yields a percentage, a transfer rate.

The question of which students to include in the cohort must be answered first. The definition should *not* use as its denominator all entrants, because that figure includes students who already have degrees. It should *not* include only those students intending to transfer, because data on student intentions are unreliable. It should *not* include only the students just out of high school, because many students stop out of schooling and return to the community college

when they are older. It should *not* be based on students who take only academic courses, because occupational education contributes many transfers. It should *not* include only the full time students, because part time students account for two-thirds of the enrollment and many of the transfers. It should *not* include associate degree recipients only because most of the transfers do so without obtaining a degree from the community college. It should *not* include sophomores only, because half the students transfer before obtaining as many as thirty units at the community college.

What *should* the definition include? The denominator should include only those students who take college credit classes because most remedial and non-credit work is non-transferable. It should include students who complete some minimum number of units at the community college, who have been enrolled long enough for the college staff to have a chance to work with them. It should allow at least a four-year span between community college entrance and transfer because few students matriculate and then move on within only a couple of years. And it should be based on data that are available from student records at the colleges and at the universities or the state system offices.

Using those guidelines, the transfer rate can be defined as *all students entering the community college in a given year who have no prior college experience and who complete at least twelve college-credit units, divided into the number of that group who take one or more classes at the university within four years.*

The Transfer Assembly Methodology

The staff of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges began the project by inviting samples of the nation's community colleges to participate in the Transfer Assembly. Initially, the 240 colleges with at least 25 percent minority enrollment made up the invitation list because the Ford Foundation was particularly interested in the progress of minority students. The first round of requests in 1989 found forty-eight of the invited institutions able to provide the data on the students who had entered their college in 1984 with no prior college experience and who had begun course work at a university by 1989. In the following year the same 240 were again asked to provide the data, this time on their 1985 entrants, and 114 colleges participated. In 1991, the sample of colleges invited was expanded and 155 colleges participated.

Last year, in 1992, the Transfer Assembly began seeking the data from the state agencies as well as from the colleges. The reason for this shift was that individual community colleges can provide data on the number of students who entered in a given year with no prior college experience and on the number of that group who completed at least twelve college credit units but they cannot typically provide information on the number of that group who matriculated at a university. The first two data elements can be derived from the community colleges' own student information system, whereas the data on students who took classes at a university must be obtained from the receiving institutions.

Soliciting the requisite information from the state higher education agencies proved

somewhat more fruitful. A few states have coordinated student information systems and were able to generate community college and university student information from that source; New York, Kentucky, and Colorado are examples of such states. Other states have centralized community college databases that could be matched with centralized public university databases; Illinois and North Carolina are examples of such systems. And in others there is a centralized public university student information system against which matches can be run if the data on entering students who receive twelve units can be obtained from the community colleges; Texas and California exemplify such states, the latter having two central data systems, one for the California State University system and the other for the University of California.

The National Transfer Rate

The transfer rates for each year of the Transfer Assembly were:

No. of Participating Colleges	Year Students Entered	No. of Entrants	Percent Receiving 12+ Credits Within Four Years	Percent Transferring Within Four Years
48	1984	77,903	50.5	23.7
114	1985	191,748	46.7	23.6
155	1986	267,150	46.7	23.4
345	1987	473,469	46.1	22.0

Participants

By soliciting data from the state agencies the number of colleges participating increased considerably in the most recent year. Through March, 1993, the Center had received data on student transfer from more than one-third of the public community colleges in the nation. In Fall, 1987, these colleges served as the point of first entry to higher education for 473,469 students; 218,226 of these students received at least 12 credits at the college they entered; and by 1991, 48,015 of the latter had transferred to a baccalaureate degree-granting institution.

Included in the 345 colleges that provided data on their 1987 entrants were all or most of the public community colleges in California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Washington, West Virginia and Wisconsin, plus a few colleges from 15 other states. Following is the number of participating colleges in each state: Alabama (3); California (61); Colorado (17); Florida (1); Georgia (2); Illinois (50); Indiana(14); Kansas (2); Kentucky (14); Louisiana (4); Maryland (3); Massachusetts (15); Michigan (1); Missouri (1); Minnesota (18); Mississippi (1); New Jersey (1); New Mexico (1); New York (24); North Carolina (52); Ohio (1); Oklahoma (2); Oregon (1); Pennsylvania (2); Rhode Island (1); South Carolina (1); Washington (27); West Virginia (11); Wisconsin (13).

Limitations

There are some general limitations of the definition and the way that the data were compiled. In only a few instances were data available from the independent universities, and in even fewer were data obtainable from universities outside the state where the student began in a community college. The four-year limitation also misses the students who do not transfer until five or more years after initial entry. Specific limitations center on a few peculiarities in the state databases. For example, one state office could track only those students who were enrolled in the universities during their fall term, leading to an undercount of the transfers, and another entered into the cohort only those students who took 12 or more credit hours during their first semester at the community college, thus yielding an overcount. But the commonalities and magnitude of the data set override these anomalies.

Why the Differences?

The year-to-year consistency in both the percent of entering students who received 12 or more credits within four years and the percent who transferred is notable, especially since the sample of colleges increased each year. Still, the national transfer rate of 22 percent masks many differences between institutions and between states. In California, for example, the overall transfer rate for the sixty-one community colleges that participated in the study was 22 percent. But the range was from 3 to 42 percent. Many factors may have contributed to these wide differences: community demographics; the college's level of emphasis on one or another of its basic functions; the college's proximity to a university campus; the staff's vigor in pursuing articulation agreements; the fit between college and university programs.

Similarly, even though the transfer rate in all the states with large, comprehensive community college systems clustered around the 22 percent national mark, the states ranged from 11 to 40 percent. State system policies differ greatly. In some states the two-year institutions are organized as branch campuses of the state university; here, as expected, the transfer rates were high. In states where the colleges are organized as technical institutes that emphasize trade and industry programs, the transfer rates were correspondingly low. It seems that the structure of the state's higher education system and the place of the community colleges in it overrides the more commonly cited variables of expenditures and population demographics.

Summary

What can be done with the data? The transfer rate indicator is most useful for individual colleges seeking to estimate the effects of various interventions. As a college views its own transfer rate from year to year, the staff can consider what happens when more resources are devoted to transfer centers, orientation programs, counseling interventions, curriculum modifications. Whether or not the institution and its governing board want to emphasize the transfer function, at least they have a database from which the effects of augmentations or detractions can be viewed. For the analyst seeking estimates of the community colleges'

contribution to student progress, a set of data on transfer collected uniformly across the states is indispensable.

The Center for the Study of Community Colleges plans on coordinating the Transfer Assembly for at least two more years, calculating transfer rates for the students who entered in 1988 and 1989. Thus a continuing, databased view from which the community colleges' actual contributions to student progress toward the baccalaureate is emerging.

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